

A Short History of Egypt

Part III: The New Kingdom and its Aftermath

Shawn C. Knight

Spring 2009

(This document last revised February 3, 2009)

1 The Early Eighteenth Dynasty

The expulsion of the Hyksos was completed by Ahmose, thought by most Egyptologists to be the son of Seqenenre Ta'o II and the younger brother of Kamose. Ahmose brought order and unity to Egypt once more and drove the ruling Hyksos Fifteenth and Sixteenth Dynasties out of the land. He also gave great honors to the women of his family: his mother Queen Tetisheri, and his wife Queen Ahmose-Nefertari were regarded highly for generations to come. His son Amenhotep I, together with Ahmose-Nefertari, was actually worshipped as a god centuries later, as the protector of the royal cemeteries near Thebes.

Amenhotep was succeeded by Thutmose I, who abandoned the Seventeenth Dynasty cemetery at Dra Abu el Naga in favor of a nearby valley. Thutmose's architect Ineni recorded that "I supervised the excavation of the cliff tomb of His Majesty alone, no one seeing, no one hearing."¹ The valley became the burial site of choice for the rest of the New Kingdom pharaohs, as well as those courtiers (and even pets) whom they particularly favored, and is known to us today as the Valley of the Kings. Thutmose was succeeded by his son, Thutmose II.

When Thutmose II died, he was succeeded by his second wife, Hatshepsut, the stepmother of the young heir, Thutmose III. Hatshepsut is perhaps the best-known of all the female pharaohs, with the possible exception of Cleopatra VII. She reigned as Thutmose III's regent, but quickly assumed all the trappings of kingship in her own right: depicted in a kilt and often (though not always) with a false beard. In many cases, the final *-t*, which in Egyptian grammar marks feminine nouns, is dropped from her name. Her architect Senenmut supervised the construction of a magnificent funerary temple for her beneath the cliffs of Deir el Bahri, near the Valley of the Kings.

Hatshepsut was, from all evidence, an effective and respected ruler in her day. She undertook an expedition to a land which the Egyptians called "Punt", believed to be near present-day Somalia, and which was particularly rich with exotic foods and spices. Her explorers brought back many animals and plants, all apparently won with little if any use of force against the natives. She was particularly devoted to Amun, the patron god of Thebes and with it the growing Egyptian empire, even when compared with the rest of the dynasty. She had herself depicted and captioned as his daughter (or son) numerous times, and she says that she did her best to create a most impressive monument to him:

"... My heart bade me make for him two obelisks of electrum ... Then my soul stirred, wondering what men would say who saw this monument after many years and spoke of what I had done ...

Concerning the two obelisks which my majesty has has *covered* with electrum for my father Amun ... It was my wish to have them cast in electrum, I have at least placed a surface upon them."²

¹Reeves, Nicholas, and Wilkinson, Richard H. *The Complete Valley of the Kings: Tombs and Treasures of Egypt's Greatest Pharaohs*. Thames and Hudson, 1996, p. 91.

²Desroches-Noblecourt, Christiane. *Tutankhamen: Life and Death of a Pharaoh*. New York Graphic Society, 1963, pp. 33-34.

Thutmose III followed his stepmother on the throne in his twenties. Egyptologists disagree on how fondly the king looked upon his predecessor. What is known is that a number of Hatshepsut's monuments were defaced and her name replaced with his, but certainly not all of them. Perhaps Thutmose regarded her later building projects as rightfully his, since he had come to manhood some years before becoming sole ruler. Some Egyptologists have maintained that Thutmose attempted to practice full-scale *damnatio memoriae* upon his stepmother. The jury, as they say, is still out. Part of the problem is uncertainty as to exactly when his reign began, owing to confusion about how dates were expressed during the period where they seem to have ruled together.

What is certain is that Thutmose reigned for several decades more after his stepmother, during which he conquered much of the Middle East. While the Egyptians did not settle in the countries Thutmose conquered, he obtained their submission and they began to send large amounts of wealth, as annual tribute, along with princes and princesses; the former to obtain training in warfare, agriculture, and architecture from the Egyptians, the latter for the pharaoh's harem.

Thutmose was followed by his son Amenhotep II, and he in turn was succeeded by his son, Thutmose IV. Thutmose IV was, it seems, Amenhotep's son by a secondary wife and not the eldest, but the heir apparent, his half-brother, died prematurely. Thutmose credits none other than the Great Sphinx of Giza for this. A stela (an inscribed stone tablet akin to modern "historical markers" he erected between the Sphinx's paws tells the story. The prince fell asleep in the shadow of the Sphinx's head, which at the time was the only exposed portion; the rest was buried in sand from centuries of neglect. The Sphinx appeared to Thutmose in a dream and told him that if he cleared the sand away, the Sphinx would make him king. Thutmose awoke with a start, rode back to the palace, and ordered his servants to make it happen. The rest is history, and the tablet is now referred to as the "Dream Stela."

The tribute from the subjugated "vassal states" of Asia Minor kept pouring in as the Egyptian army continued drilling and patrolling and remained the finest force in the region. Thutmose's son Amenhotep III is known today as "Amenhotep the Magnificent" because of the incredible wealth and luxury he and his court enjoyed. He also did something unusual for a pharaoh; instead of marrying his sister or cousin, or a tributary princess from Mitanni or Syria, he married a woman who seems to have been an Egyptian commoner, a woman known to us as Queen Tiye. She seems to have been very beautiful,³ but more importantly, very strong-willed and a capable advisor to the pharaoh. Her father Yuya and mother Thuya were buried in the Valley of the Kings; though disturbed by robbers in antiquity, many beautiful objects (and the couple's mummies) were found, and it was the most splendid discovery in the Valley until Tutankhamen's tomb was unearthed. Amenhotep's heir apparent seems to have been a Prince Thutmose, but he predeceased his father, and this might have been one of the most significant deaths in Egyptian history.

2 The Amarna Period and the End of the Eighteenth Dynasty

Amenhotep III was succeeded by Prince Thutmose's younger brother, Amenhotep IV, who became one of the most remarkable pharaohs in all the dynasties. Looking back to his grandfather, who thanked the sun god (as the Sphinx) for his kingship, Amenhotep concluded that the sun god, visible and sovereign in the sky as the source of light and warmth, was the true ruler of the cosmos, rather than the invisible and mystical Amun.

Early in his reign, Amenhotep IV changed his name (meaning "Amen is pleased") to Akhenaten (possibly "spirit of Aten"). Aten was a word for the sun god which seems to be simply the Egyptian word for "disk". Given the great wealth and prestige which the priesthood of Amun had accumulated in the years of tribute and gifts they received from Akhenaten's predecessors, this caused quite a stir. But Akhenaten was only getting started.

He abandoned the city of Thebes and sailed, with his court, down the Nile to Middle Egypt where he founded a completely new capital city which he named Akhetaten ("Horizon of Aten").

³A mummy widely believed to be Tiye's was found in the Valley of the Kings in 1898; we will take a closer look at her when we investigate mummification.

Akhetaten's ruins were found at the modern village of Tell el-'Amarna, and from this the entire period is referred to as *the Amarna Period*. The city was planned and laid out systematically from the beginning, ordered around the palace and temple of Aten. Then, moved by increasing religious zeal (or increasing jealousy of the wealth and prestige of the other deities' priesthoods), he made the almost unthinkable move of ordering all gods other than Aten to be abandoned: their temples cut off from all sources of revenue.

Particularly vindictive to Amun, late in his reign Akhenaten sent workers into Amun's temples and even the tombs of his predecessors to chisel out the name of Amun wherever it could be found. Additionally, Akhenaten took an oath to his god never to leave the boundaries of his holy city, which broke the pharaonic tradition of touring the country to oversee building and agricultural works, and most likely reduced a great deal of his prestige and awe in the minds of the common people. On one hand, it made him more myth than man, but on the other, the principle of "out of sight, out of mind" cannot be forgotten.

Akhenaten also introduced sweeping reforms in Egyptian art, creating a much more naturalistic and realistic depiction of the human body, including honest depictions of his own person, which appears to have suffered from several unusual deformities. He is depicted with an unusually long face, a bulging abdomen, an almost hatchet-like chin, almost absurdly fleshy lips, and very long hands and feet. Some of these deformities have been connected with a condition known as Marfan's Syndrome by the American Egyptologist Bob Brier, but again, the jury is still out, and unfortunately, Akhenaten's body has never been positively identified (though several unidentified mummies are candidates for it).

All this change seems to have caused great strain upon the Egyptian economy, but perhaps Akhenaten's most disastrous policy was that of pacifism. He neglected the maintenance of Egypt's military conquests, until by the end of his 17-year reign, Egypt was back to its pre-18th-Dynasty borders and power. The reason for this is generally thought to be his religious beliefs: Akhenaten wrote a number of hymns to the Aten which extol its virtues as a peaceful god, a god which "all people" could recognize and love and worship, and so he seems to have been loath to use force to control the rest of the world.

Akhenaten had six daughters by his Great Royal Wife, the famous Nefertiti, but she bore him no sons. There is some confusion about his successor; there is a pharaoh Smenkhare who appears briefly, though some Egyptologists suggest that this was a throne name of Nefertiti, ruling after her husband's death. Other Egyptologists believe that one of the candidates for Akhenaten's mummy is actually Smenkhare's. If "he" was a separate person, Smenkhare would likely have been Akhenaten's younger brother, or half-brother.

Following the brief and mysterious reign of Smenkhare, a nine-year old boy named Tutankhaten ascended the throne. Some Egyptologists⁴ argue that he was the youngest son of Amenhotep III and Tiye; others⁵ that he was the son of Akhenaten by his secondary wife Kiya. Whatever the case, Tutankhaten was guided by his vizier, a man called Ay, who is thought to be Queen Tiye's brother (which would make him the boy king's uncle or great-uncle), and his general, Horemheb, who had served a token role in the army under Akhenaten. He was married to Ankhesenpa'aten, one of Akhenaten's six daughters, to legitimize his claim to the throne.

Not long after he became king, Tutankhaten began a program of restoration. It is impossible to say at this distance in time how much of this was the young king's idea and how much was written by his elders and simply received his seal of approval, but the names of the royal couple were changed to Tutankhamen and Ankhesenamun; the political capital was moved from Akhetaten to Memphis; the religious capital was moved to Thebes; and the priesthood of Amun was soon given back their lands and their prestige. Tutankhamen was a fairly prodigious builder for such a young and shortly-reigning king, but many of his monuments were usurped by his successors.

For reasons still unknown, Tutankhamen died around eighteen to twenty years of age. Much evidence has been drawn from his mummy by Bob Brier⁶ and other Egyptologists to suggest that he

⁴Desroches-Noblecourt, *Ibid.*, *passim*.

⁵Reeves, Nicholas. *The Complete Tutankhamun: The King, the Tomb, the Royal Treasure*. Thames and Hudson, 1995, *passim*.

⁶Brier, Bob. *The Murder of Tutankhamen: A True Story*. Berkley Books, 1998, *passim*.

was murdered, and even by whom. The “prime suspect” is none other than the vizier, Ay: he had a motive (his own candidacy for the throne) and the means (as one of the very few people to have access to the king). Most damning, Ankhesenamun sent some letters to the king of the Hittites—a Turkish people who had long been enemies of Egypt—Suppiluliuma, asking him to send one of his sons to come to Egypt and reign. Mursilis, Suppiluliuma’s successor, writes that his father was naturally skeptical:

“The people of Egypt . . . their lord Nibhuruiya⁷ had died, therefore the queen of Egypt . . . sent a messenger to my father and wrote to him thus: ‘My husband died. A son I have not. But to thee, they say, the sons are many. If thou wouldst give me one son of thine, he would become my husband. Never shall I pick out a servant of mine and make him my husband! I am afraid!’

“When my father heard this, he called forth the Great Ones for council: ‘Such a thing has never happened to me in my whole life!’ ”⁸

Ankhesenamun wrote an even more desperate plea, and Suppiluliuma interviewed the Egyptian ambassador, Hani, who confirmed the story. Finally, Suppiluliuma was convinced that all would be well, and sent one of his sons; but the prince was murdered on the border of Egypt by Egyptians. Mursilis reports further that Suppiluliuma declared war, and defeated much of the Egyptian army, but that the prisoners brought a plague back with them and ever since then, the Hittites were dying.

Despite Ankhesenamun’s best efforts, Ay became pharaoh, and he married Ankhesenamun to cement his claim. Her name appears side by side with his, in cartouches, on a ring found by Egyptologist Percy Newberry and brought to the attention of Howard Carter. But he reigned only four years more, already an old man, and in his tomb, the queen depicted with him seems to be his wife from Akhenaten’s reign, Tey (not to be confused with Tiye); the cartouche next to her, though badly damaged, is large enough to contain “Tey” but not “Ankhesenamun”. Brier and many other Egyptologists believe that Ay committed or ordered no less than three murders: Tutankhamen, the Hittite prince, and Ankhesenamun herself.

Ay was followed by Horemheb, who is probably the second most important suspect in the “murder mystery”, and quite possibly was the accomplice and even the “trigger man”, especially in the case of the Hittite prince. Horemheb was still a relatively young and healthy general and probably figured that he could play along with Ay and bide his time, waiting for the old man to die peacefully.

With Horemheb comes the obliteration of what remained of the city of Amarna. It is widely believed that Akhenaten’s mummy and those of his family were destroyed at this time (though as we have noted, there is some disagreement on this issue). Horemheb also usurped the majority of Tutankhamen’s monuments and, in perhaps the greatest insult to the Amarna pharaohs, he dated his own reign from the death of Amenhotep III, which led to Akhenaten, Tutankhamen, and Ay being skipped altogether in the histories. He married a woman named Mutnodjmet, believed to be the younger sister of Nefertiti, perhaps to provide a tenuous but manageable claim of relation to the dynastic family. How Tutankhamen’s tomb and lavish treasure survived Horemheb’s reign remains one of Egyptology’s enduring mysteries.

3 The Nineteenth Dynasty

Following the death of Horemheb, his vizier and old comrade in arms Pramesse took the throne as Rameses I, and is considered to begin a new dynasty, the Nineteenth. Like Ay, Rameses was an old man when he came to the throne. His tomb in the Valley is very small and unfinished as a result. His son, Seti I, had a much longer reign and built what is perhaps the most well-finished and beautiful tomb in the Valley. Fittingly, his mummy is also one of the most marvelously preserved mummies ever found in Egypt. Seti was particularly devoted to Osiris, the god of the dead, and built a magnificent new temple for him in Abydos, complete with a chronological list of all the

⁷*Nibhuruiya* is a reasonable rendition in the Hittite language of Tutankhamen’s throne name, *Nebkheperure*.

⁸Brier, *op. cit.*, pp. 176–179.

pharaohs from Menes—the legendary founder of Egypt now equated with Narmer—to himself. And the Amarnan pharaohs are missing.

Seti's son was even more successful. Named Rameses II after his grandfather, his was the second-longest reign of any pharaoh, some sixty-seven years. He is known to history as 'Rameses the Great'. A warrior by nature, Rameses reconquered much (though not all) of the empire which Thutmose III had built up, but he is also famous for negotiating one of the world's first peace treaties, with Hattusili III of the Hittites. The treaty clearly names each king's father and grandfather (Mursilis and Suppiluliuma on Hattusili's side, *Menma'atre* (Seti I) and *Menpehtire* (Rameses I) on Rameses's side) and covers several facets of alliance: the kings agree to dwell in peace and fraternity; they agree to defend one another against third parties; they agree to assist one another in suppressing rebellions; and they even agree to extradite criminals or deserters who flee from one country to the other!

Besides his foreign relations, Rameses is famous for his progeny. He had over one hundred daughters and fifty sons, the first twelve of which he outlived; he was succeeded by his thirteenth son, Merneptah. Rameses built more temples and monuments than any other pharaoh, and in fact, more than *most* of the other pharaohs *put together*, but he did usurp the monuments of many of his predecessors, though not those of his father, to whom he seems have been a most dutiful and respectful son. Evidence indicates in fact that Rameses completed some of his father's projects, such as the temple of Osiris at Abydos, and took no credit at all for them.⁹

Merneptah did not outlive his father by very long: about ten years. Upon his death, there is some confusion. He was succeeded by his son Seti II, but another king named Amenmesse appears. He may have been a cousin of Seti's, given the vast number of children Rameses II produced. Amenmesse reigned for only about five years—possibly alone, possibly dividing the country with Seti—and then Seti becomes the undisputed ruler, followed in turn by his son (or according to some, Amenmesse's son) Siptah. Siptah had a deformity of the lower leg and died young, succeeded by Seti's wife Tawosret, who had served as Siptah's reign for much, perhaps all, of his six-year reign.

4 The Twentieth Dynasty

The Twentieth Dynasty was founded by a pharaoh named Setnakht. Again, it is unclear what his relation to the previous royal family was, and how he became pharaoh if he was not a legitimate descendant of that line. We cannot rule out a usurpation by force. He reigned only a few years, less than five, and then the long dreary series of Ramessides begins. The first, Rameses III, fared well; he reigned some thirty years, and did his best to emulate his "Great" namesake in courage and deeds. Most Egyptologists look upon Rameses as the last great pharaoh of Egypt.

He repelled invasions by the Libyans, and he faced the so-called "Sea Peoples"—probably a confederation of displaced tribes from Asia Minor. These people devastated Cyprus and Syria and destroyed the Hittite empire on their way to Egypt, but in Rameses III they met their match. Thousands of their warriors were captured or killed; the walls of Rameses's funerary temple at Medinet Habu, near the Valley, depict huge heaps of severed hands being piled before Rameses by his victorious generals. However, the greatest threat to the king was domestic; a plot to assassinate him was hatched in his own harem, an indication of how far the prestige of Pharaoh was falling.

His son, Rameses IV, undertook a massive building program, but died after a short reign, and was succeeded by a series of rulers named Rameses—V through VIII—whose reigns were even less noteworthy, none exceeding seven years long and producing no monuments or achievements of significance except their Valley tombs. These kings were probably not a series of fathers and sons, but rather brothers and cousins who took the name upon their coronation. Rameses IX brought some stability to the throne, with a nineteen year reign, and a tomb in the Valley full of strange and beautiful funerary texts, some of which are not known outside its walls.

The prestige of the pharaoh decreased throughout this period, particularly in comparison with the priesthood of Amun, which continued to grow richer and more influential, until finally, during the twenty-seven year reign of Rameses XI, the last pharaoh of the dynasty, the high priest of Amun, Amenhotep, was able to have himself represented on the same scale as the pharaoh.

⁹The evidence is mainly to be found on notes made by scribes and the literate members of the construction gangs.

Soon thereafter, the country seems to have collapsed into civil war. In Upper Egypt, Amenhotep's successor as high priest, Herihor, had his name inscribed in a cartouche, as a pharaoh would, while Lower Egypt was taken over by Nesbanebdjed, a native of Mendes in the Delta, whom Manetho called Smendes, perhaps fusing the name of his city with his personal name which must have been quite unmanageable in Greek. Some Egyptologists believe that Nesbanebdjed and Herihor were compatriots, and together overthrew Rameses XI, dividing the country between themselves. And so at last, the magnificent New Kingdom came to an end.

5 The Twenty-first Dynasty: Dawn of the Third Intermediate Period

Herihor established a hereditary succession to the office of high priest of Amun, replacing the traditional appointment by the pharaoh, as part of the “settlement” with Nesbanebdjed. Furthermore, he obtained for himself and his successors the position of commander-in-chief of the army, while Nesbanebdjed's successors on the throne “ruled” the country from their new capital of Tanis in the Delta, the same city made modestly famous by its role in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, while Herihor and his line paid them some degree of respect. In fact, one of Herihor's successors, Pinudjem I, married the daughter of Rameses XI and their son, Psusennes I, became the next Tanite pharaoh, thus bringing the two centers into greater harmony.

The high priests of Amen pronounced the new Twenty-first Dynasty to be a new era in Egyptian history, an era they called *whm mswt*, “repetition of births”, or in other words, “the Renaissance”. The dynasty found Egypt at peace and produced many beautiful works of art, notably funerary objects such as coffins. The pharaohs of Tanis were interred in a series of tombs, mostly intact, which housed splendid coffins and funerary masks of gold and silver, unrivaled in Egyptian art save for Tutankhamen's.

Meanwhile, the priest-kings of Thebes are believed to have enriched themselves largely by plundering the wealth of the New Kingdom pharaohs' tombs in the Valley.¹⁰ Whether motivated by lust for gold or pious concern for the remains of the rulers, the priests definitely entered the tombs, which were probably already being plundered by more conventional thieves, removed the bodies, rewrapped them, relabeled them as best they could, and moved them from one tomb to another. Eventually, after the death of the last priest-king, Pinudjem II, many of the royal mummies were moved into his tomb, known today as Deir el-Bahri Tomb 320 (DB 320 for short), while a few others were moved into the tomb of Amenhotep II.

Egypt was soon to be reunified by the Twenty-second dynasty, but the long centuries of decline had begun, the “Renaissance” notwithstanding.

— △ —

¹⁰We will consider this when we look at the discoveries of the late 1800's in the section of the course on the history of Egyptology.